WORLD WITHOUT WORKSHOPS

BY BILL WINKLEY

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Imagine a world without sheltered workshops for blind persons. Instead all blind workers are integrated into the mainstream workforce, even the most severely and multiply handicapped. There are things happening in the United States today that indicate such a world is not out of reason or reach. In fact, it might not be optional. Professionals in the field of vocational rehabilitation are challenged to open their thinking to some of the new possibilities.

Before looking at this world without workshops, some of the stumbling blocks to its realization heretofore will be examined. This entire presentation is based upon my belief that handicapped people are a minority group discriminated against in many of the same ways as other minority groups. This concept, of course, is not a new idea, but rather one that has been written about repeatedly. It was explored quite thoroughly at the American Foundation for the Blind's 50th Anniversary Symposium on Attitudes Toward Blindness, held in 1971. The reader is encouraged to study the publication resulting from that symposium, entitled Attitudes Toward Blind Persons by Irving F. Lukoff, Oscar Cohen and Others. Mr. Cohen, who at the time was national program director of the Anti-Defamation League of B'Nai B'Rith, makes the following important statement in his presentation:

> "My principal conclusion is that independence must be the focus of efforts to change attitudes toward the blind. Vigorous and extensive measures to achieve the independence of blind persons, offering equal opportunity to blind people, and demonstrating that they are capable of a wide range of capacities will achieve two significant results. First, it will combat discrimination and offer blind people enhanced possibilities of normal employment and social and economic integration which they do not now enjoy. Secondly, as a result of the observation of and participation in this process, the attitudes of the general public toward the blind will change."[1]

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Berthold Lowenfeld holds an important position in our discipline and has spoken out many times on the need for integration for the minority group we represent. One such statement appeared in the Fall 1982, issue of the educational journal, Education of the Visually Handicapped. AEVH:

> "I must confess a bias that underlies all my assumptions. I believe uncompromisingly that integration of the blind into society is on all levels in their and in society's best interest. There are others who have said that it is cruel to expose blind persons to the vicissitudes of our competitive society and that they would be happier if left by and to themselves. I cannot share any such view and believe that integration is by far the better way of securing for blind persons equality of opportunity, equality of status and equality in the pursuit of happiness."[2]

An amplification of this belief was made by James Haskins in his book, Who Are The Handicapped?:

> "The increased visibility of the disabled within the heart of the community and the expanded opportunity for social interaction cannot help but break down the barriers between the "normal" and the disabled. It is this kind of familiarity, and first-hand experience, that is the best antidote to the irrational fears and prejudices of the non-disabled toward the disabled. The more the non-disabled actually witness the disabled functioning in their world, in their neighborhood, the more they will grow to accept them as social equals."
>
> "In the community, at school, at work or play, provision must be made to include everyone in every activity of our society. We can no longer continue our policy of exclusion based on arbitrary physical and mental standards if we expect to survive as a functioning, healthy social unit. Human potential is our country's most valuable natural resource and we cannot afford to proceed indefinitely with its indiscriminate waste. There must be a place for every man no matter what his strength and weakness."[3]

Further statements regarding the minority group status of handicapped persons abound and few thinking professionals would take issue. Where the greatest resistance is found is in the notion of integrating severely and multiply handicapped blind persons. However, before substantiating that all the rules on integration apply equally to this sub-population of blind persons, I suggest that much still needs to be done with and for the blind person who has no other disabilities. Who would question that there are many singularly disabled blind persons holding jobs far below their potential? Many are in sheltered workshops; others are in competitive employment with little or no hope for upward mobility. Certainly, as the service emphasis shifts to the severely and multiply handicapped blind person, we cannot overlook, diminish or do anything but intensify our efforts for these important individuals. However, for the purposes of this presentation, we will concentrate on the severely and multiply handicapped blind person.

Consider another thought on integration and segregation. Were there neither prejudice nor discrimination over the course of human history, would the specialized facilities and programs ever have been initiated? Were there no discrimination in employment against blind persons, would sheltered workshops ever have been founded? Were mainstream education available for blind children over the last century, would special education classes for the visually handicapped ever have been initiated? The author of this presentation grew up in Austin, capitol of the State of Texas. He remembers the Texas School for the Blind and the Texas School for the Deaf where blind and deaf children with white skin went to school. For black, blind, deaf and orphaned children then was the "B.D. and O.", a separate school. When discrimination was outlawed by the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the "B.D. and O." ceased to exist. It is suggested that the demise of discrimination against blind people and severely and multiply handicapped blind people portends the demise of special facilities and separate programs. If the greatest combatant to discrimination is integration, it further appears that separateness perpetuates the prejudice and its resultant discrimination.

Unfortunately, the very law that corrected the situation for black people as well as other minority groups, did not cover handicapped people. One obvious possibility on which we should concentrate our efforts is the amending of the

Civil Rights Act of 1964 to include those we represent. Possibly the two reasons such an amendment has not been made over the last twenty or so years are that the leadership in the field has not so advocated and that the population to be effected is relatively small in terms of numbers of votes.

If the words of Charles A. Stewart in the publication Attitudes Toward Blind Persons are true:

> "Those of us who have an opportunity to work toward habilitation of blind persons are in the best position to bring about societal changes in attitudes."[4]

then, certainly we have to assume the primary responsibility if changes do not take place and, for that matter, have not taken place. Stewart summarizes the efforts of Cohen as follows:

> "Cohen stops short of accusing agencies of consciously perpetuating the dependency of blind persons in order to raise funds, but believes that the drive for self-perpetuation is strong in all social welfare agencies."[5]

Although the punch has been pulled, the message comes through. If attitudes change, separationist programs will be abandoned.

Applying these thoughts to sheltered workshops for the blind, we find another consideration proposed by John Naisbitt in his book, Megatrends. In essence Naisbitt predicts the end of industrialization in America. He sees the years 1956 and 1957 as the beginning of the end of the industrial era. Significantly he points out that our best thinkers were confused and at a loss to comprehend what was ahead. Many, instead, chose to deny or at least ignore this change. It is suggested that much of this head-in-the-sand approach to planning exists today with leaders in the field of vocational rehabilitation for the handicapped. Important information for this consideration is posed by Naisbitt:

> "The real increase has been in information occupations. In 1950, only about 17 percent of us worked in information jobs. Now more

than 65 percent of us work with information as programmers, teachers, clerks, secretaries, accountants, stock brokers, managers, insurance people, bureaucrats, lawyers, bankers and technicians...only 12 percent of our labor force is engaged in manufacturing operations today."[6]

And Mr. Naisbitt warns:

"It makes no sense, for instance, to reindustrialize an economy that is based not on industry, but on the production and distribution of information. Without appreciation of the larger shifts that are restructuring our society, we act on assumptions that are out of date. Out of touch with the present, we are doomed to fail in the unfolding future."[7]

For those who would respond that we should give to the handicapped the jobs that make up Naisbitt's industrial 12 percent, he quotes a well-known American magazine:

"Newsweek magazine estimates that "from 50 to 75 percent of all U.S. factory workers could be displaced by smart robots before the end of the century."[8]

Lest we then say, "Okay, we'll settle for the 3 percent left," our Megatrend Man goes on to warn:

"'Operators are no longer people who should be thought of as coming to work in T-shirts', says Bill Parish of Maryland's sewage plant compliance section. 'They need mechanical engineering and biological backgrounds'."[9]

Automated factories run by a few highly trained professionals abound in Naisbitt's future. Robots will do the work. For example, in 1982, there were only 4500 robots in the nation's auto industry, but it is predicted by the Robot Institute of America that there will be more than 60,000 robots in the auto industry alone by 1990. Naisbitt compares the developments in the area of industrialization to the recent history of food production.

"In about 1800, 90 percent of our population produced 100 percent of the food. Today...only 3 percent of our population produces 120 percent of the food we need. The surplus is stored or exported.

"That is the direction our industrial production is going. As part of this process, we will increasingly run our factories with information rather than laborers. Robots will play a big role in bringing this about. Conservative estimates predict that by 1990 we will be producing 17,000 robots per year and that the total robot workforce will reach 80,000. Most experts would double that figure."[10]

In its annual report of 1982, National Industries for the Blind highlights the achievements of 5,472 blind persons employed in 102 NIB-associated agencies.[11] If Naisbitt's figures are correct, less than one-third of 1990's production of robots could replace the entire workforce. NIB and its associated shops are challenged to study these "megatrends" and make plans, adaptations and adjustments as they move into the future.

Before we leave Naisbitt, we will explore some valuable insights he shares on why organizations are often either unaware of or resistant to change. First, he suggests that many organizations fail to ask themselves, "What business are we in?".[12] The classic example is the railroads, who saw their business as moving goods by rail, not simply the transportation of goods. Holding on to their beliefs, they were soon eclipsed by the trucking and airplane industries. Had they seen "transportation of goods" as their mission, they would have moved over to these other modes as their values were recognized. It is suggested that an analogy exists with the field of vocational rehabilitation and in particular, sheltered workshops. The following strategic questions seem appropriate:

1. What business are we in?
2. Do sheltered workshops, although useful for the last 50 years, still represent the best mode for our realizing our goals?
3. Are there changes in the overall milieu of American business and commerce that do and will impact the sheltered workshop movement?

4. What "strategic vision" do sheltered workshops have for the future?
5. What "strategic planning" is being done in the light of that vision?
6. Could sheltered workshops be the railroads of today?

Consider Naisbitt's protrayal of labor unions in today's marketplace:

> "Labor unions are now entirely preoccupied with survival. All of their actions are short term and defensive in nature. Unless labor unions reconceptualize their role in the society, they will continue on their dramatic downhill slide."[13]

Substitute the words "sheltered workshops" for "labor unions" in this passage. Have not the challenges of the workshop system by the American Council of the Blind, the National Federation of the Blind, private industry, the House Oversight Hearings, and even the consumer put the shops in a similarly defensive posture?

In a recent position paper titled, "Serving Multihandicapped Blind People", National Industries for the Blind purports:

> "If full or partial economic self-sufficiency is to be attained at all by blind persons with complicating vocational limitations, it is most likely that this will occur primarily under the conditions of the special workshop for the blind."[14]

Can we hold on to the concept of sheltered workshops, when it is likely they will be unneeded in the near future? The future of sheltered workshops, just like the railroads, is not to be determined from within. Rather, the changes nationally and globally will determine that future. Failure to recognize these colossal changes condemn them to obsolescence.

How then can the field of services to the blind acquit its responsibility to serve blind persons with severe and multiple disabilities in addition to

blindness? If, indeed, sheltered workshops are rapidly becoming a thing of the past, can these people be served at all vocationally? Of the 5,472 blind people served by workshops for the blind in 1982, 2,615 had handicaps in addition to blindness.[15] If, as NIB claims, their rehabilitation "will occur primarily under the conditions of the special workshop for the blind", then these persons appear to be without hope for work, wages, and the dignity that comes with both. Or could the integration techniques we have used for singularly disabled blind people be effective in placing severely and multiply handicapped blind persons?

Dr. Louis Brown of the University of Wisconsin, Madison, has had substantial success in his work with severely handicapped people, that is people with an I.Q. score of 55 or less. By reviewing his proposals, actual work and results, we can draw applications for our own. Since most of Dr. Brown's work focuses on employment opportunities for the severely handicapped, we will deal primarily with employment. Inferences exist, however, for special education and other disciplines.

Above, it was suggested that there are two basic reasons for the lack of a push to amend the Civil Rights Act of 1964: the lack of leadership in advocacy and the small populations of voters in the minority group. Certainly we can enlist voters sympathetic to our cause, but also certainly we can develop the necessary leadership to realize the goal of total integration.

In the field of sheltered workshops, Brown sees five often offered reasons (or possibly excuses) not to shut them down:

> "Severely handicapped persons can function best or only in sheltered environments;
> Sheltered facilities will always be needed because of parental and societal expectations, severe medical and behavioral problems, the absence of acceptable alternatives, and the need for backup environments for nonsheltered failures;
> Most people do not want to see or be near severely handicapped adults who are functioning vocationally in nonsheltered environments;
> Millions of tax dollars have been spent on special facilities and

taxpayers will be irate if they are not used; and
If sheltered facilities are closed, many non-handicapped persons will lose their jobs."[16]

The accuracy of Brown's observations is, of course, open to endless debate. They are presented here to encourage such debate, but more importantly, to clear our vision so that more important issues can be considered. Two of those issues are the concept of what Brown calls, "The Natural Proportion", and secondly, his teaching mode of "environment first: skills, second."

In his manuscript, Teaching Severely Handicapped Students to Perform Meaningful Work in Nonsheltered Vocational Environments, Dr. Brown and his associates define "The National Proportion" as follows:

> "The National Proportion" refers to the definitional fact that approximately 1% of our population at any chronological age can be referred to as severely intellectually handicapped. Further, environments that substantially violate the natural proportion, i.e., environments in which more than 1% of the population consists of severely handicapped persons, are inherently dangerous. However well-intentioned, well-funded, and well-staffed these environments may be, too many of those who are supposed to benefit are actually prevented from achieving anywhere near the levels realizable in environments that are naturally proportioned."[17]

"The Natural Proportion" environment provides benefits to severely handicapped persons not found in the sheltered workshop. Brown articulately develops each of his reasons why sheltered workshops are considered less acceptable than nonsheltered vocational environments in his paper. For our purposes they are presented and the reader is invited to study his manuscript for further explanation and understanding. Brown's advocacy for nonsheltered work environments is based on the following problems he sees with sheltered workshops:

Economic survival activities transcend external placement efforts;
Work related skills are rarely required or developed;

Instruction is not emphasized;
The performance of nonmeaningful work is often required;
Work and play are often fused;
Opportunities to benefit from interactions with nonhandicapped workers are not available;
Few meaningful reasons to achieve are operative;
Deviant actions are tolerated;
Waiting lists, rejections, exclusions and reduced schedules abound."[18]

In his study to demonstrate the validity of the above, Brown proposed that three distinct results would have to be demonstrated. First, that it is less costly to serve severely handicapped adults in nonsheltered rather than sheltered environments. Second, that taxpayers realize a greater return for their investment from the nonsheltered approach to employing severely handicapped persons, and finally, that the quality of life for all involved would be better. Results of the study demonstrated that the average cost of maintaining a client in a nonsheltered environment was $2,303 compared to $5,251 in the sheltered shop.[19] Regarding the second criterion, it was found that at the end of the 10th year, an individual in nonsheltered employment could be expected to earn $16,153 more than the cumulative cost of training, placement and followup service. The same individual in the typical sheltered setting, would never earn more than the training costs, costs estimated at over $50,000 over 10 years. Other studies referenced by Brown have demonstrated that the total direct financial benefit of placing a moderately to severely handicapped person in a nonsheltered job training and placement program results in over $90,000 in direct financial benefit to taxpayers over a four year period.[20] The study finally suggested that students who functioned in sheltered vocational environments led unduly restrictive lives. That is:

"They interacted with too few disabled people, the number of environments in which they functioned per week was depressingly small, and the skills they were required to perform were remarkably few."[21]

For those severely handicapped adults in the nonsheltered environments, the following were found to be life-enhancing experiences:

> "Interactions with nondisabled people;
> The rich array of sounds and sights offered in the real world;
> Friendships with nondisabled persons that extend beyond the work time and space;
> Feelings of self-worth when a severely disabled person understands that his work is valuable and that if he did not do it, nondisabled people would have to;
> The respect offered by parents/guardians and nondisabled co-workers when one makes a contribution in a nonsheltered environment;
> The sense of accomplishment associated with being allowed to take calculated risks and overcome initial obstacles and failure; and
> The pride that comes from being in a position to help nondisabled persons."[22]

Certainly these results substantiate the value of nonsheltered environments for severely handicapped persons.

Brown uses the same studies to support his thesis that learning takes place best in the environment where skills are to be applied. I know that I personally learn more Spanish when I spend a week or so in Mexico than I do in weeks of classroom study. As with my mastering Spanish, studies by Brown and associates demonstrate that the "environment first, skills second" approach works at many levels and prevents the need for extensive remediation in the traditional "assessment, episodic training, placement, and closure" method. So dramatic are these results that the following is proposed by Dr. Brown:

> "Direct vocational instruction should start no later than age 11;
> The amount of time spent in actual vocational environments should increase with age;
> No student should spend more than 2 years in a particular work environment prior to graduation;
> Over a 10-year period, each student should be given intensive,

individualized, and sustained instruction in at least five different nonsheltered work environments and at least four different types of meaningful work; e.g. food service, clerical, janitorial, and industrial;

At about age 17 or 18 those responsible for the development of an individual should start making tangible projections and decisions about the actual environments in which that individual will function at graduation; and

From approximately ages 19 to 21 a comprehensive school to postschool transition plan should be designed and implemented."[23]

Certainly Brown's proposals are controversial when one considers the extensive network of sheltered workshops serving the blind, workshops that generated substantially over $200,000,000 in sales during fiscal year 1983.[24] The thought of dismantling such a system with its millions of dollars worth of buildings, equipment and staff salaries must be threatening. People like Louis Brown and Berthold Lowenfeld would argue that to do so is the only course to follow. One can reasonably infer from their works and words that doing less is discrimination, and hence unjust. Helen Keller would probably agree that the first step is one that doesn't cost a dime; i.e., the changing of attitudes among the leadership in the field of sheltered workshops for the blind.

Closing sheltered workshops for the blind does not, however, remove the need for services in many other areas for blind and severely handicapped persons. Particularly for these latter people, extensive support services will be needed. As the railroads could have moved from trains to other modes of transporting goods, so too, the facilities can move to new modes of services. The planning, coordination and placement role of the staff of the facility increases when the nonsheltered approach is taken. Employment related services might require the skills of physical, occupational, and communication therapists. And these as well as other services will be ongoing for life, according to Brown:

"...throughout their lives they will need training and supervision to function efficiently in nonsheltered environments. Closure is rarely, if ever, appropriate."[25]

My proposal, therefore, is not the complete closing of facilities, but rather the development of a strategy to phase out separate work environments such as sheltered workshops. Employment services offered by the facilities across our nation would essentially be the arranging for training and employment in "the natural proportion" environments. Such concepts as the enclave with industry, placement through private placement agencies, self-placement, and innovative job development and modification would be explored, adopted and implemented where possible. Support services including training for elderly blind persons, radio reading service, and orientation and mobility training would become the essential function of our facilities across the nation.

This "outward bound" approach to serving persons who are blind has been evolving at the El Paso Lighthouse for the Blind over the past several years. Examples of this new philosophy include our Radio Reading Service which is dedicated to bringing information to blind persons that can be integrated into their personal lives. The goal is full emancipation and participation in all areas of community life. Additionally, our elderly blind program is no longer conducted at the facility, but rather in the nutrition and senior citizen centers around El Paso as well as the clients' homes. Probably most exciting, however, is our "enclave with industry".

Over five years ago, it was realized on a routine placement tour that one of the products manufactured by Convertors Division of American Hospital Supply employed skills similar to those taught in the vocational training programs of the Lighthouse. Because the work was performed in a "clean" room at the Convertors plant, we proposed taking over the complete production line there in their facility. Persons performing the work would be on our payroll and under our supervision. Space, utilities, and quality inspection would be provided by Convertors. Convertors would have the advantage of not having to administer and manage this significant component of their total manufacturing operation. Benefits to the Lighthouse clients were many; however, the greatest was seen as the opportunity for clients to perform their work in a more normal, "real world" environment. A third important advantage was that non-handicapped people would have the opportunity to test many of their prejudices about people with disabilities and when they did not hold up, discard them.

Since its inception, these and many other benefits have accrued the Lighthouse, its clients, and certainly Convertors. Built into our contract (which is renegotiated annually) is an agreement that when clients reach productive levels of 80-100% of standard, they have the opportunity to apply for regular employment with Convertors. Convertors has the advantage of seeing a potential employee at work for months before deciding to hire him. In fact, several clients have been hired by Convertors and become a part of their regular work force. Because Convertors has not been able to absorb all clients ready for nonsheltered employment, others have found for themselves or been placed into jobs with other companies. And importantly, clients go into these "outside" jobs with a security and sense of familiarity they would not have, going directly from a sheltered workshop. In the "real" world, this workshop without walls has worked so well, we have been able to close our sheltered facility entirely, turn back the government contracts to National Industries for the Blind, and most recently move the work activity center to Convertors.

Greatest resistance to this latest move came not from management, but rather from the plant safety engineer and nurse. Both had sincere fears that the severity and multiplicity of the disabilities of these blind clients would make their involvement disruptive and non-productive. With strong support and handholding by Lighthouse staff, these fears have been almost completely allayed. Tight emergency procedures for clients that have special medical needs such as epilepsy and diabetes have been developed. Appropriate and reassuring liability clauses have been incorporated into the contract. With client permission, medical records have been provided Convertors staff. Their attitudes have gone from complete skepticism to total confidence and actual pleasure at being integral to this innovative approach to rehabilitation. The enclave has become a source of good public relations and pride for Convertors.

* * *

One of the beautiful concepts behind karate and the other martial arts is that rather than resisting an opposing force, you redirect it to your own advantage. Sheltered workshops for the blind have the opportunity to do more to break down discrimination against the minority group they represent than at any other time in their history.

The challenge is to change our attitudes or at least, "suspend our disbelief", and open our thinking to what is going on in the world around us. Once the external pressures are understood and the internal insights developed, we can redirect our efforts and our service systems to realize the goal of total integration for the minority group we represent.

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